

CLASS AND UFMCC

by Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, 1993

It is always difficult to discuss the issues of class, especially in the U.S., and, in the context of the church of Jesus Christ.

There is the problem of definition. I have found the most helpful U.S. resource for definition of "class" to be Paul Fussell's book entitled Class.

Fussell claims that in the U.S., we grow up with the illusion that class does not exist. And, paradoxically, that education alone provides the "ticket" to travel up the class ladder! The fact that we have very stable realities that carry over from generation to generation in spite of educational achievement is ignored. Our public schools do not teach about class, historically or in contemporary society.

The fact is that today there are still about 200 families in the U.S. that control 90% of the wealth in the world, and they function as a mostly faceless aristocracy. They are the "out of sight" rich/elite.

Also, there is a growing, mostly urban underclass that survives on underground economies and various forms of welfare. Some move in and out of prison and other institutions, and some are permanently homeless or inadequately housed and fed. This is the "bottom out of sight" group that has become more visible in the 80's and 90's.

In between are the rest of us, mostly concentrated in a narrow economic/class range called working class/"lower" or "middle"/middle class.

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH UFMCC?

UFMCC was born into class conflict. The historical context for MCC was the late 60's "counterculture." This counterculture included drop-outs from the middle class, alliances between rich and poor, all kinds of new social movements, and an overt attempt at a "classless" cultural revolution. The civil rights movement had been a training ground, and the women's movement was just beginning to become visible.

Just by virtue of "coming out" in the 60's, 70's, and a little less so today, gays and lesbians gave up class privilege, if they had any to begin with. That is why Stonewall was largely the action of poor drag queens -- those who had nothing to lose in terms of their class status.

Into this amorphous "pre-Stonewall" burgeoning gay movement (not yet political on a wide scale) came Troy Perry: a working class, white, Pentecostal, southern man. Someone with little "countercultural" experience or identification. Overnight, Troy became a religious leader and gay activist, who actually did have something to lose (though not very much) and risked it. He had a job at Sears, and had already lost his family, ministry, and certain perceptions of himself.

Troy attracted, at first, working gay men and lesbians who went to gay bars to socialize, and who longed for a spiritual home.

Embedded in that longing were also class yearnings for social acceptance, some marks of respectability, and something that would come to be called "gay pride" (an equivalent, to some degree, of "black power.") All gay and lesbians, regardless of class, could and would identify with that spiritual hunger and the longing for acceptance.

At first, however, those with nothing or little to lose and those with extraordinary courage formed MCC. That would include working gays and lesbians who were easily identifiable, and in "nontraditional" jobs that were safe for "out" gays and lesbians. It would include closeted folks with more to lose who used phony manes. It would include the street and bar crowd, who continued to enliven the early culture of MCCLA and other early MCC churches.

In those days, only a handful of MCC folks, for instance, were "white collar" workers or owned their own homes. That put increased pressure on MCC to own its own home.

To people who have always owned their own homes, the fact that the church would have property is no big deal. But to MCCLA in the early 70's, this was a monumental achievement. For most of the members in those days, MCCLA would be the only home they would even partially own! Owning one's home is primarily a middle class value or assumption, one that working class people aspire to and achieve. Many of the leaders of the earliest MCC churches were among the few homeowners. They gave sacrificially to help the church move "up", in terms of class identification.

A handful of genuinely middle class people got involved in early MCC. For example, the Rev. John Hose, who was a businessman from a middle church background (UCC). He brought stability and an extra measure of respectability (with a graduate theological degree). He was also among those who resisted Rev. Perry's bold social activism in the beginning. This was more threatening to the more conventional middle class mentality that found a lot of the "excesses" of 60's activism appalling! There were the occasional eccentric rich, even upper class folks, who, with a certain measure of insulation from the consequences of identifying with MCC, contributed from "behind the scenes".

CLASS ISSUES TODAY

Education:

Rev. Troy Perry is a high school drop-out. However, from the beginning, he supported the idea of a well-educated clergy. He attracted clergy from other denominations with graduate professional degrees. This set up a dynamic, ongoing tension in MCC.

Some of us are from church backgrounds (poor, working class) that did not require accredited education for clergy because it was not feasible (with Roman Catholic being the big exception) to finance higher education. The anti-intellectualism of poor and working class churches is not so much a choice as a posture of reaction. "We do not want to want



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what we cannot (or believe we cannot) have." Some say we don't want our clergy to be educated because they will be "less spiritual." Also, because as they have had contact with "educated" and often more "liberal" clergy, they have felt the class put-downs and patronizing attitudes.

Some of us came from churches where a Master of Divinity degree (M.Div.) was an absolute minimum requirement for clergy, and are shocked or put off by clergy without graduate degrees, understanding that the book of Acts describes the first apostles as "untrained lay(men)." There is a universal middle class assumption that an M.Div. is essential for a "respectable" clergy.

Obviously, this class conflict is a major issue in UFMCC. Some people are dedicated to seeing that MCC "raises" its class identification by requiring all clergy to have a higher level of education, ideally an M.Div. Many clergy from poor or working class backgrounds have gone to graduate school and struggle with the consequences of that in their own class consciousness. Some have stubbornly resisted the educational class pressure and have held MCC to its minimal standards, have pieced together educational requirements from Samaritan, community colleges and other sources.

"Correspondence" courses, for instance, are a "classic" class indicator -- they are working class, pure and simple, designed for students who have no seminary to attend, who cannot afford the tuition money for class work or formal seminary programs. They are mostly associated with unaccredited (read that "low class") Bible schools.

We are now in a situation where M.Div. and non-M.Div. clergy in UFMCC compete for limited full-time positions. Where, until recently, Samaritan College offered Track I (non-M.Div.s) and Track II (M.Div.s) Orientation programs, truly an institutionalizing of class differences.

Also, what is the market (local churches) demanding? How have they changed or not? How do MCC clergy compare themselves to other clergy in their cities or neighborhoods? If an MCC clergy does not have an M.Div. or equivalent-sounding degree, how do they feel when the local Methodist or UCC pastor says "Where did you go to seminary?" (class assumptions). The local Assemblies of God pastor is not a likely colleague, although their educational path may be more comparable to that of an MCC pastor. In addition, of course, in the first 10 years of UFMCC, almost no "mainline" seminaries would accept openly gay students, especially in some regions of the U.S. Homophobia became a class issue, as MCC students were barred from middle class theological education.

This began changing radically in the 80's and 90's. More MCC folks were routinely admitted and even were eligible for loans or scholarships from mainline seminaries. Also, gay and lesbian seminarians, or clergy from mainline churches were interested in transferring to UFMCC. However, in order to do that, they had to confront their own classism in even considering identifying with MCC. What kind of church is this? How are UFMCC clergy regarded as "professionals" (a more middle class perception of clergy)? What about salaries, benefits, and pensions? Job security -- how is MCC regarded in terms

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of class, by people in mainline denominations? How is coming out of the closet a downwardly mobile act?

UFMCC: the class "squeeze"

Today, UFMCC exists in a different "squeeze." Our competition as a church comes from two "poles:"

1. The "reconciling." Mainline churches, slowly opening to gays and lesbians, slowly fighting for ordinations within the large, wealthy, stable (but declining!) Protestant establishment. They are our "middle class" competition. Who will reach the "unchurched" gay and lesbian middle/upper classes?

2. The "independent churches." Christ Chapels, the old "Trinity" movement, those who hold the evangelically oriented "Advance," "Unity Fellowship," Bishop Carl Bean -- this is our poor, working class competition. Those who don't embrace the more middle class (perceived) feminist agenda, inclusive language, who still reach out to the "bar" culture (maybe less critical of drug/alcohol use), who still exhibit signs of internalized homophobia (they sometimes include gay "celibates," and are often connected to those in the Ex-gay movements). Who will reach the poor and working class unchurched gays and lesbians?

Church Externals:

MCC is constantly "giving off" class indications by what kind of buildings we rent or own, in what neighborhoods, and how we decorate and furnish them. What kind of organ do we have? (pipe = middle/upper; Rogers = working class!)

Music is a class indicator - what hymnal do you use? What kind of special/choir music?

How people dress at church: This is a tricky one. On the one hand, poor people often like to dress up for church. For some, church clothes are their only dress-up clothes. Poor or working class people like their pastor to dress well and drive a nice car, so that he/she will be seen as "lifting up" the social status of the church. Working or middle class people may like their pastor not to be "higher" than they are, but, more or less equivalent, respectable. The very wealthy don't mind if the pastor is kept in their "place" -- not poor, but humble!

More comfortable, settled, secure middle class folks don't overdress for church, especially in a gay/lesbian context. More secure middle or upper class people are not terribly anxious when poor people, poorly dressed people show up to church.

But working class people who are passing for middle class are the most anxious. (They now have a middle class profession, education, income.) They are terrified, psychologically, if not actually, of being "dragged down" the class ladder. They want the church to distance itself from the poor, the ragged, the less well-educated. They fuss more about the church's appearance. They are very sensitive about class indications. They are embarrassed about reminders of MCC's class origins. This is the "group" (clergy and laity)

in MCC that is large, growing, and can be highly volatile, reactionary, and needs to be educated and "defused" about class issues.

THEOLOGY AND CLASS:

In this context, I believe that theological conflicts in MCC are often (thinly) disguised class conflicts, encoded in theological language. For instance:

1. "High Church" (anglo-Catholic, sometimes also Lutheran, churches with wealth, status)
2. "Low Church" (Pentecostal, evangelical, lower class origins)

A lot of what we call the "liberal" theological perspective has its roots in middle class seminaries, denominations and movements. Liberals are "well-educated." In fact, the "fear" of conservatives is that if you go to seminary, your faith will be "changed" (deleted, less evangelical).

"Conservative" theology is rooted in evangelical/Pentecostal churches and schools with a definitely working class orientation.

I believe that a lot of the so-called "theological debate" in UFMCC are partially an acting out of our class conflicts.

CONCLUSION

We need translators and interpreters who will communicate across theological/class lines.

Is a truly multi-racial, multi-class church possible?

Do poor and working class identified people feel more and more pushed out, put down, tossed away by our increasingly well-educated, middle class, affluent "power elite" in UFMCC?

Who will be the major market of UFMCC growth in the next decade - from which class will they come?

Do "transfer" clergy, those from middle or upper class church origins feel resistance from UFMCC local or denominational leadership? Do they feel like they are still "outsiders," "newcomers," even "carpetbaggers?" Do they feel the resentment of those who "sacrificed," and how it's not as costly now for middle class folks to come to MCC?

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